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THE ART & CRAFT OF LETTERS

ESSAY

BY
ORLO
WILLIAMS

LONDON: MARTIN SECKER
NUMBER FIVE JOHN STREET ADELPHI



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THE ESSAY





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MOST people in the morning of their lives have sat down before a few blank sheets of paper, under that system of rewards and penalties known as education, to write what has been called an essay. I recall—if one may rightly be discursive upon so discursive an art—the first task of this kind that I was required as a schoolboy to attempt. The theme set for my introduction to this new and wonderful branch of learning was “The Force of Habit,” and I remember, after beginning, as a schoolboy would: “Force of habit is when you do something you are used to without thinking about it,” the stunning effect of the discovery that there was really nothing more to be said. Nor, indeed, was there, from the point of view of a schoolboy, a being whose habits are constantly changing, and who has certainly not acquired the one habit essential to an essayist, that of discursive reflection upon men and manners. Nevertheless, that was the best subject for an essay ever set to me for a task; the fault lay in its being immeasurably too far advanced: it is even doubtful if a class composed of Mr. Max

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Beerbohm, Mr. George Street, Mr. G. K. Chesterton, Mr. A. C. Benson and Vernon Lee would reach the highest standard on that subject with an hour's time limit. No, I apologize to Mr. Benson ; he would, of course, be polished and exhaustive. At any rate, I was neither, and my tutor, whose eye had been fixed upon a certain scholarship examination, decided to concentrate on Latin prose. He never even showed me how he himself would have set to work, an omission which I have regretted to this day. When, at length, I went up for the examination, and found myself with a hundred other little boys in a long schoolroom, furnished with century-old wooden desks and decorated with historic busts, I chose, with commendable temerity, to lucubrate upon the opinion — one of several propounded — that "trade follows the flag." The opinion was entirely new to me, for I recollect no previous instruction upon the mobility of trade, and I only hope that even the recording angel has forgotten my early views upon the subject. It is interesting, however, to reflect that this public school, which applied such a test to the intellect of a fledgling, ignored the business of essay-writing in its own curriculum. There was an essay-prize for senior boys, which nobody regarded seriously, and was usually won by somebody who took his classics

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easily, thus finding leisure to learn by heart a certain body of historical information for reproduction in three given hours—could any system be more foolish than to set a historical or political theme weeks beforehand, and to fix a bookless, noteless three hours, disturbed by other scratching quills, for the written composition?—but the majority picked up the principles of English composition as they might by answering questions in examinations.

Those who, thus equipped, went to Oxford found themselves confronted, in degrees of insistence varying with their colleges, with the duty of composing a weekly “essay.” This feature of the Oxford tutorial system—admirable training for those who chose to benefit by it—is by no means intended to encourage the sprouts of individual imaginations: it is looked on as a means of acquiring knowledge and showing that the acquisition has been digested, so that in the severer tests of “Collections” and “Schools” the pupil may not be wholly unprepared to give an account of Plato’s theory of ideas, to criticize the Athenian policy in assailing Syracuse in the midst of the Peloponnesian War, or to show similar acumen in tackling more modern historical problems. There are University prizes, too, for portentous essays which are annually won by those who conduct successfully a piece of special historical research.

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There are also literary societies where young men devastate one another with what are at least modestly called "papers" upon Shakespeare and the musical glasses, at the conclusion of which the audience, who have not studied the particular subject, sip port for some minutes in gloomy silence, and wicker chairs creak horribly till a bold one, seeing all other eyes glazed, rises to break the spell with fragmentary eloquence.

Now many a man has got so far, and many will continue to do so till English composition is taught as an art, without having written a real essay in his life and, perhaps, without ever having read one. If he has acquired the shadow of a style, it has been by some strange hazard, some congenital receptivity of ear aided by a taste for reading. What he *has* learnt, is to collect information compendiously, and to present it more or less logically; he may even have won an essay-prize which none of our English essayists could possibly have won, even in their maturity. It is something, of course, to summarize facts clearly and to indicate intelligibly a personal bias to one among conflicting interpretations of them, but, as an achievement, it stands towards the complete art of essay-writing as skill in freehand drawing to painting a picture. For that reason I am inclined to consider it unfortunate that the term "essay" is applied to these

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scholastic exercises, when there is that excellent word "theme"—used in this sense in many other tongues of Europe—already in the language. The absence of distinction between the mere exercise and the finished artistic form favours the general impression that an essay is necessarily dry, exact and informative, when it is really, at its best, the most delightfully airy mould of thought, which admits of every literary grace and every high quality of mind compatible with its essential smallness of scale. No subject is special to it, none alien from it. It should set out to prove nothing, but can illuminate anything. If it will hardly accommodate sublimity or lofty passion, it unfailingly exposes triviality and dullness. For the essay, that "irregular, undigested piece" as Dr. Johnson unkindly called it, is a sure test of its writer's mind. Be he a wit, a poet, a buffoon, a plain journeyman or a mere windbag, his essay will be his own confession. When Hazlitt wrote :

"What abortions are these Essays ! What errors, what ill-pieced transitions, what crooked reasons, what lame conclusions ! How little is made out, and that little how ill !"

he was indulging a fit of momentary depression. No man could continue to write essays with so mean a view of his achievement. An essayist must be in good conceit with himself, for it is

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in moods of complacency that the best, as well as the worst, of an artist's nature is revealed. Wherefore those judges are to be commended who attach much importance to the setting of essays in important examinations, provided that the subject to be treated requires no body of exact information for its treatment—a condition too seldom fulfilled. There are many ways of exhibiting knowledge—by answering questions, monopolizing conversation and so forth, but the essay is not one of them. The essay may use knowledge, but what it reveals is taste, good judgment, and that most precious quality, originality.

Yet, this distinction having been drawn and the scholastic exercise dismissed from notice, there still remains a confusion in the general use of the term "essay." Pope's "Essay on Man" and Locke's "Essay on the Human Understanding" are noble works, books that have influenced the thought of generations, but they are no more essays than, in Charles Lamb's definition, encyclopædias are books. No doubt the authors of these complete studies chose the title of essay for them out of a kind of modesty, not wishing to appear before their contemporaries as portentous or dogmatic, but rather as having put forward tentative views, in all humility, for their consideration. It was

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a sign that they advanced their views as common individuals rather than as men of authority, and to that extent they recognized the truth that an essay must have a personal atmosphere. Still, they had as little right to use the term as Velasquez would have had if he had called his portraits miniatures, for the essay is, in some sort, a miniature, or, if you prefer it, an *aquarelle*. Turner's water-colours are as much essays in paint as Schumann's *Phantasiestücke* or Chopin's *Preludes* are essays in music. But, so far as Locke and Pope are concerned, there is no need to labour the point. Their works will stand, on general admission, far outside the scope of any discussion such as this.

There is, however, a nicer point to be settled, which is a matter of no little difficulty. I have said that no subject is special to the essay and none alien from it, that it should set out to prove nothing but may illuminate anything. This is a wide admission, and we may well pause if, to test it, we take Lamb's "Essays of Elia" in the right hand and Macaulay's "Essays" in the left, to consider if there be really any common denominator of the two. On the one side is Elia dusting away at his bauble, now boisterous, now gently tender, on the other is the intellectual genius, the honoured administrator, contributing brilliant fanfares to the *Edinburgh Review*; while the one sets down in

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imperishable lines the pictures of his father and his sister or mildly vents his spleen against the Scotch, the other proclaims the place in history of a Pitt, blasts an Elijah Impey and flays a wretched Montgomery alive. It would be easy for me to say that in this very series one author has already spoken of history, and that another is about to take literary criticism for his subject, so that, lest I trespass on their ground, I must bid Macaulay avaunt and Matthew Arnold and much of Robert Louis Stevenson.

In all probability I shall do so, but it is not entirely without misgiving, for all human thought, scientifically considered, is parcelled out into special allotments, philosophy, art, literature and the rest, with none of which have we here specifically to do, and therefore the work of any writer of essays may come into the purview of several specialists. How, then, is any line to be drawn? If one gives up Macaulay and Matthew Arnold too easily, one may find even Lamb threatened with abstraction. The "South Sea House" might be snatched by some inquisitive historian of commerce, Mrs. Battle's "Opinions on Whist" might slip into the pocket of some student of card-games, "A Chapter on Ears" would certainly be purloined by a musical theorist, a legal biographer could hardly let go "The Old Benchers of the Inner Temple," and as for the

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admirable dramatic criticism of "My First Play," "On Some of the Old Actors" and "On the Acting of Munden," they would be a gift to the specialist in drama. To stand by and see a subject dissolve piecemeal before one's eyes, like a lump of sugar insidiously attacked by a few drops of water, would be an absurdity. It must be defended, if not by logic, then by arbitrariness; and the arbitrary stroke shall be to say that, even though Macaulay and Matthew Arnold saw fit to call their occasional writings essays, even though they displayed therein brilliance of style, literary grace, and originality of view, these were not typical essays at all. In general, it may be said that contributions to quarterly reviews are not essays, and that all writings intended to contain a proof or to examine a proof, to appraise some opinion or some character, to describe a series of facts or to trace a series of tendencies are equally excluded from this discussion. Hazlitt wrote essays, and we shall not accept all that he wrote as such. We shall cherish his discourse "On Going on a Journey" and reject his criticism of Sir Joshua Reynolds' æsthetics. We shall admit De Quincey on "Murder as a Fine Art" or on the "English Mail Coach," while we reject him on "The Rosicrucians." We shall exercise the same discrimination between Stevenson's "Familiar Studies" and

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his "Virginibus Puerisque." In fact, what is here meant by an essay is a typical composition by a typical "essayist."

Those who may think that the last sentence destroys at a blow the arbitrary entrenchment, leaving the field as open as before, must be asked to pause for a moment. There lived in Paris, in the first half of the nineteenth century, a charming person called Gérard de Nerval, who, after translating Goethe's "Faust" into French prose, after assisting, as one of Victor Hugo's lieutenants, in the glorious days of "Hernani" and after sharing the brilliant Bohemian existence of Théophile Gautier and his friends, wandered through life, his brain becoming mistier as his pocket grew lighter, to an unhappy ending in a sinister alley. He wrote plays in verse and sketches in prose, but he was unsuccessful because he cared little for success, as he became indigent because money did not attract him. His one sorrow was an unhappy passion for an actress, his one pleasure was incessant wandering. His body seemed a mere envelope for his spirit, which was wafted hither and thither like a leaf in the wind. Stability was for him a negation of existence, and his friends, who loved him with devotion, compared his flittings to those of a swallow. He would have liked, he once said, to spend

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his days in continuous walking, unrolling ever an immense roll of paper on which he jotted his quaint reflections. This complete peripatetic, this finished *noctambule*, who roamed through Europe and the East, his pockets crammed with odd scraps of paper, always at the mercy of his fancy, *prenant toujours l'ombre pour la proie*, has left an image of himself in his graceful and whimsical prose works, "Les Filles du Feu," "La Bohème Galante" and "Nuits de Rhamadán," which are just the fantastic, airy trifles, tinged with a faint, unearthly melancholy, that might have been expected from a Frenchman of so exceptional a character, gifted with the most delicate perception, endowed with true scholarship and tainted with a mystical eccentricity that finally developed into complete but harmless insanity. Now it was this author whom the ingenious Champfleury, in his precious "Vignettes Romantiques," saw fit to characterize as "un essayiste française," using a borrowed term of which his generation well knew the meaning. In spite of Montaigne, the French—and the Germans too, who have also borrowed the expression "essayist"—regarded the essay as indigenous to England, and when Champfleury with perfect propriety called Gérard de Nerval an *essayiste*, he meant to describe him as a writer who, abandoning the forcible logic, the incisive wit and the

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brilliant colouring of the French *prosateur*, chose to let his pen indicate all the contours of his individuality, record his changes of mental equilibrium like the needle of a seismograph and indulge, in exchange for epigram, that elusive quality, also English, known as humour.

If, then, the French and the Germans know what an essayist is, I trust that we know also, so that to define an essay as the work of a typical essayist is not a mere tautology. It is probable that the term "essayist" was transferred to the French language in the eighteenth century, when the fame of the *Tatler*, the *Spectator* and the *Rambler* had spread to the European capitals and denoted a writer of occasional pieces in the style of Steele, Addison or Dr. Johnson. But the prose of Gérard de Nerval, so far as it can be compared with English prose, is far most akin to that of Sterne, who was not, formally speaking, a writer of essays. Yet that very fact brings up a point worth noticing, which is that, if admitted essayists have sometimes written essays that were not essays, there have been some typical essayists who never wrote essays at all. The first and foremost of these is Sterne himself, whose "Tristram Shandy" and "Sentimental Journey" have all that whimsical discursiveness, that delight in tossing the subject, like a shuttlecock, with a resonant battledore of humour, that careless readiness to explore every

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promising bypath of a theme, which is the essential quality of an essayist. Heine, too, was never more truly an essayist than when he wrote the "Reisebilder," which was ostensibly a collection of travel-sketches. His diverting description of the University of Göttingen in the first book and his ironical picture of Munich as the "new Athens" in the second are, among others, immortal instances of the essayist's individual quality. Again, to return to our own country, there was an essayist born in Samuel Butler, the author of "Erewhon." Of his right to the title "Erewhon" itself or "Alps and Sanctuaries" would be sufficient proof, had not the inimitable "Notebooks" been published. In their pages are true essays in plenty, transferred with care, as the author's habit was, from the rough jottings of a pocket-book to a more stately album and methodically indexed. Happy indeed were the friends of this odd genius who were admitted to this intimate banquet in his lifetime. I might quote many of them to illustrate my point, the first "Unprofessional Sermon" on "Prayer," for instance, or the page on "Genius," but I choose, for its perfection in brevity the note entitled "My Son":

"I have often told my son that he must begin by finding me a wife to become his mother who shall satisfy both himself and me.

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But this is only one of the many rocks on which we have hitherto split. We should never have got on together ; I should have had to cut him off with a shilling either for laughing at Homer, or for refusing to laugh at him, or both, or neither, but still cut him off. So I settled the matter long ago by turning a deaf ear to his importunities and sticking to it that I would not get him at all. Yet his thin ghost visits me at times, and, though he knows that it is no use pestering me further, he looks at me so wistfully and reproachfully that I am half inclined to turn tail, take my chance about his mother and ask him to let me get him after all. But I should show a clean pair of heels if he said ‘ Yes.’

“ Besides, he would probably be a girl.”

Sterne and Samuel Butler cannot properly be admitted within the limits of my subject, but they come in to show that what makes an essayist is mainly a quality of mind. The true essayist handles his subject like an artist and not like a professor. He takes up some pretty crystal of thought, not, as a chemist, to enlarge upon its composition and its relation to other chemical bodies, but rather as some cunning master-jeweller, lovingly polishing each facet, making it glint in the light, and setting it quaintly in some device of his own that it may attract the lovers of beautiful things and live long in their possession.

II

It may be said that every age, where thought has been articulate in letters, has had its essayist, even if he lived unheard, for the essayist's type of mind, though it is peculiarly favoured by the climate of England—where the weather itself is an essayist—is not necessarily limited by nationality or epoch. I would wager that there were essayists in China, and that more than one has been found in Egypt swathed in the wrappings of a mummy. The writers of Ecclesiastes and the Book of Wisdom were essayists: the Book of Psalms contains some admirable essays. The Greek nation, like the French, fostered essayists hardly, living in too bright an atmosphere. Yet were there not dear, rambling Herodotus, and Xenophon, and even Plato, and are there not essays enshrined in the iambics of Euripides? Cicero was a trifle solid and declamatory, but he was as much an essayist as Doctor Johnson, and Pliny the Younger had those parts of an essayist that undoubtedly belonged to Horace Walpole. It is possible that an essayist or two might be found among the less fervent fathers of the Church, and certainly Rabelais had a tincture of the quality, witness

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Panurge's discourse upon debtors and creditors. Cervantes was an essayist, Shakespeare was an essayist ; in fact, all great writers that have seen to the roots of human nature have browsed upon and assimilated the pasture which feeds the soul of an essayist. Nevertheless, since all the essayists have not written essays, and it is with essays that we are here concerned, we need not quarrel with Mr. Edmund Gosse's words in the *Encyclopædia* :

“ It is not often that we can date with any approach to accuracy the arrival of a new class of literature into the world, but it was in the month of March, 1571, that the essay was invented. It was started in the second story of the old tower of the castle of Montaigne, in a study to which the philosopher withdrew for that purpose surrounded by his books, close to his chapel, sheltered from the excesses of the fatiguing world.”

Here, near the vineyard that produces the golden liquor of Yquem, the retired magistrate, who would rather have been the “second or third man in Perigueux than the first man in Paris,” amid the hundreds of volumes that, like our indefatigable Burton, he so copiously quoted, cast his experienced eye at random over the sea of human life, like a pensioned mariner with his telescope upon a harbour jetty, watching the fair weather and the foul, the prosperous

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voyages and the unlucky, curious of the new craft, reminiscent of the old, calculating the chances and drawing the moral from his acquired lore for the entertainment of generations. It is astonishing, in retrospect, that mankind should have had to wait so long. If the essay was to be invented by a cultivated administrator, who had voluntarily retired to lettered ease and felt a desire to leave a portrait of himself to posterity, why, then there must have been many such before the amiable *Sieur de Montaigne*. Yet, as nature chooses her time to bring a particular vein of ore to the surface, so was this castle of *Montaigne* in the later part of the sixteenth century reserved for the outcrop of the essay.

It cropped out as an unconscious, rather than a conscious, work of art. "Reader, loe here a well-meaning book," says the author.

"It doth at the first entrance forewarne thee, that in contriving the same, I have proposed unto my selfe no other than a familiar and private end : I have no respect or consideration at all, either to thy service, or my glory : my forces are not capable of any such desseigne. I have vowed the same to the particular commodity of my kinsfolks and friends : to the end, that losing me (which they are likely to do ere long) they may therein find some lineaments of my conditions and humours, and by that meanes reserve more whole, and more lively foster the

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knowledge and acquaintance they have had of me. Had my intention beene to forestal and purchase the world's opinion and favour, I would surely have adorned myself more quaintly, or kept a more grave and solemne march. I desire therein to be delineated in mine owne genuine, simple and ordinary fashion, without contention, art or study ; for it is my selfe I pourtray."

These humble words are true, but they are not the whole truth. Montaigne assumed no airs and decked himself with no graces ; he laid his nature as bare to his friends as Pepys laid bare his own for his private satisfaction ; he wrote less with studied art than with the natural eloquence of a day when common speech was still golden : nevertheless, I accuse the wily old knight of setting down in that preface the only not quite sincere words he ever wrote. What did it matter to his " kinsfolks and friends " that Psammetichus, king of Egypt, saw his daughter led to execution unmoved but wept at the captivity of a friend, whether the " capitaine of a place besieged ought to sallie forth to parlie " or " whence this custome ariseth, to bless an say God helpe to those that sneese ? " How did it preserve his lineaments to collect a mass of quaint anthropological information or to expatiate freely upon sexual hygiene under colour of commenting on Virgil ? The truth is that the *Sieur de Montaigne* wrote to please him-

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self and possibly his contemporaries, mixing artistic satisfaction with a drachm of mortal vanity, and by this he was the first essayist who wrote essays. It is vain for him to protest that art is nothing to him. No doubt he troubled little about the laws of rhetoric, and felt no need to exercise his invention ; he allowed his pen to run, unquestionably, whither it would, neither rounding paragraphs nor weighing periods : but whether he was speaking of himself or of the ancient Greeks, whether he alluded to the band round his belly recommended by the doctors against seasickness or proclaimed that he “ would have a man to be doing, and to prolong his lives offices, as much as lieth in him, and let death seize upon me, whilst I am setting my cabiges, carelesse of her dart, but more of my imperfect garden,” he was conscious, not of conforming to external canons, but of performing that essential work of art, which is creating.

Montaigne was a true artist, but this is not to say that all his essays are perfect works of art. In the light of the treatment of the essay-form by later essayists it is easy to point out other deficiencies in Montaigne's essays, besides laxity of style. To take a small one first, we have come to regard excessive quotation and too copious illustration as blemishes in literary art. The essay should, above all, have the air of being an

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impromptu, of having been dashed down *d'un seul jet*, and only so many quotations and instances adduced as a man might easily carry in a well-stored memory. A greater quantity of this alien matter produces an impression of a certain preliminary mechanical industry and a suspicion that an author, so anxious to document himself, must have been conscious of a thinness in his own ideas. Some of Montaigne's essays—the ones on "Cowardice" and on "Custom," for instance—are little but transcriptions from a notebook, while in others the point is often swamped in the multiplicity of its illustrations. But the same fault is to be found in our own writers of this and the next century, in Sir Thomas Browne, in Sir Philip Sidney's "Defence of Poesie," and most of all, in Burton's "Anatomy."

The revival of learning was chiefly responsible for this defect. Such was the veneration for the classics that in Montaigne's day a Latin quotation or a Greek instance had in itself almost the weight of a syllogism. A more serious spot on Montaigne's mantle is his unwavering constancy of attitude. Not mobile by nature and incapable of feigning, he could not for a moment throw off the character of a kindly seer, conscious of his frailty and tolerant of all things. He never waxes hot or passionate, he never trifles, he is never sentimental: he smiles, but he never

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laughs, just as he shows suffering without tears. The perfect essayist is a more variable being, and I am English enough to hold that he should have humour, and Montaigne, as a writer, had not humour. This is not to accuse him of no sense of humour or of not appreciating the amusing side of life, but this whimsical relaxing of the intellectual feature was not in his power. It is here that as an essayist he so obviously differs from Sterne and Lamb, and, as an introspective writer, from Samuel Pepys, who saw the humour of nothing more readily than that of his own inimitable self. Those who read Montaigne in the original or in Florio's translation, from which I have quoted, are apt to get an illusion of quaintness from the old-fashioned diction and style. To the contemporaries of Montaigne and Florio this illusion was not present, and it may be rectified by glancing at an eighteenth-century translation. There are times, in so doing, when one almost fancies Dr. Johnson to be speaking.

Nevertheless, let nobody suppose that I would detract one whit from Montaigne's glory or from the admiration that is his due. He invented a form of inestimable value and revealed a personality of wondrous charm. How great and how rare was his natural art can at once be shown by comparing him with Bacon, his imitator and the first of our recognized English essayists.

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This great man, the *buccinator novi temporis*, who "wrote of science like a Lord Chancellor," revealed his true genius in the "*Novum Organum*." He was not at heart an essayist at all. He had far less humanity than Montaigne and as little mobility of feature. He was an excellent philosopher and a noble stylist, whose terse sentences that ring like a hammer on an anvil are an untarnished adornment to our body of English prose. "What is truth? said jesting Pilate; and would not stay for an answer. Certainly there be that delight in giddiness, and count it a bondage to fix a belief; affecting free-will in thinking, as well as in acting," or "God Almighty first planted a garden; and, indeed, it is the purest of human pleasures"—who could not be proud of such magnificent *exordia*? But to take up Bacon's essays after Montaigne's is like listening to a preacher after taking counsel of a charming friend. Bacon writes in his robe of office, Montaigne in his *robe de chambre*. Both of them discoursed upon friendship—and how vast is the difference! Bacon is pithy and sensible, and never lapses from a right view of the matter; he speaks of friendship like a doctor:

"We know diseases of stoppings and suffocations are the most dangerous in the body; and it is not much otherwise in the mind; you may take sarza to open the liver, steel to open

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the spleen, flower of sulphur for the lungs, castoreum for the brain ; but no receipt openeth the heart but a true friend, to whom you may impart griefs, joys, fears, hopes, suspicions, counsels, and whatsoever lieth upon the heart to oppress it, in a kind of civil shrift or confession.”

He expatiates on the use of friends to princes, on the benefit of a friend’s counsel and the many services that a friend can perform, but at the end of all the reader wonders if Bacon ever had a friend he loved. Montaigne’s essay on friendship is one of the most beautiful that he ever wrote, and it mirrors the man himself. In it, while touching on the more ordinary friendships and associations of mankind, he celebrates that peculiarly deep affection of one man for another, which was his for Etienne la Boëtie, an affection of which he could say : “ If a man urge me to tell him wherefore I loved him, I feele it cannot be expressed, but by answering ; Because it was he, because it was my selfe.” From first to last he speaks as a human being from a full heart, as one who has tested the value of all human conjunctions, appraising them honestly at their worth—“ Concerning familiar table-talk, I rather acquaint my selfe with, and follow a merry, conceited humour, than a wise man : And in bed I rather prefer beauty, than goodnesse ; and in society or conversation of familiar discourse, I respect rather sufficiency, though

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without Preud'hommie, and so of all things else"—but judging them from the attainment of that mystical unity of perfect friendship which he enjoyed for four years, and in memory whereof he could but write :

“ Since the time I lost him, I doe but languish, I doe but sorrow : and even those pleasures, all things present with me, instead of yielding me comfort, doe but redouble the grief of his losse. We were co-partners in all things. All things were with us at halfe ; me thinks I have stolne his part from him. I was so accustomed to be ever two, and so enured to be never single, that me thinks I am but half my selfe.”

The personal feeling in this essay is unusually strong for Montaigne, who was seldom so unrestrained, but it shows that Montaigne housed his emotions at his study table, whereas Bacon had no other company than his wits.

According to Mr. Edmund Gosse, the true father of the English essay was Abraham Cowley. Whether the paternity should really be ascribed to him rather than to Montaigne and Bacon or no, it is certain that the short pieces of prose, with poetry intermingled, which were published in 1668, one year after his death, are the earliest instances in our tongue of the essayist's intimate style, of what is nowadays called the personal note. Cowley shows in his charming essays something of the humanity of Montaigne and as

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pure a style as Bacon's, though he had neither Montaigne's capacity for all-embracing view nor Bacon's trenchant vigour. As a prose-writer he is far more delightful to read than the Lord Chancellor, and, for his perfection of form, must even be put above the French knight, though his work is altogether slighter and is not illuminated by the benignant, expansive wisdom that gives his peculiar flavour to Montaigne. Cowley, a poet from his early boyhood, wrote neither as a leisurely commentator nor a philosopher, but as a conscious artist, intensely concerned with the form of his work. He had by no means all the qualities of an essayist. There is little humour and little geniality in his essays : a thread of stoical resignation runs through their pattern. Yet, in their own mood, not only for their limpid music and their happy snatches of verse, but for their author's plain preoccupation with nothing but his own art, his own taste and his own experience, these discourses have not been surpassed. Cowley wrote with no didactic aim and with no commonplace book before him ; he spoke of solitude lovingly because it pleased him, of greatness pityingly because he had known its vanity, and of himself to explain that pleasure and that knowledge. There is a tenderness of personal reminiscence and analysis, in particular, in his essay "Of Myself," which cries to our own age across the formal objectivity of

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the eighteenth century. After reading such a passage as :

“ For I remember when I began to read, and to take some pleasure in it, there was wont to lie in my mother’s parlour (I know not by what accident, for she herself never in her life read any book but of devotion), but there was wont to lie Spenser’s works ; this I happened to fall upon, and was infinitely delighted with the stories of the knights, and giants, and monsters, and brave houses, which I found everywhere there (though my understanding had little to do with all this) ; and by degrees with the tinkling of the rhyme and dance of the numbers, so that I think I had read him all over before I was twelve years old, and was thus made a poet as immediately as a child is made a eunuch ”—

one cannot help thinking that if Rousseau’s “ Confessions ” had been written a hundred years earlier than they were, they would have hardly created such a sensation as they actually did. It was the continuance for so long of a parching wind, that dried up the tenderer shoots of individuality, which made that new breeze so refreshing.

The merging of the seventeenth into the eighteenth century, so far as the essay is concerned, may be seen in the work of Richard Steele. The smack of Elizabethan and Stuart

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prose has not wholly died out of his sentences, nor do the canons of barren good taste entirely regulate his art. There is a flavour of the man himself in all that he writes, even when he impersonates Mr. Bickerstaff. He has a more sympathetic eye, a more intimate touch, in the delineation of character, and a more full-blooded humour than his contemporaries. In his playful description of "The Trumpet Club," for instance, there is more pure fun and less of that harder quality of the wit that Addison uses in hitting off the foibles of his time. But what shows, more than anything, that, as an essayist, Steele stood on the dividing line between the two centuries is his famous "Recollections of Childhood." This simple laying bare of a human heart, which was something far deeper than the "sensibility" which Sterne vaunted, has the same pure quality as Montaigne's essay on "Friendship" or Cowley's "Of Myself." It has the true feeling which has no age and no nation. How touching is the memory of an infant's first knowledge of death :

"I went into the room where his body lay, and my mother sat weeping alone by it. I had my battledore in my hand, and fell a-beating the coffin, and calling Papa ; for, I know not how, I had some slight idea that he was locked up there. My mother caught me in her arms, and, transported beyond all patience of the silent

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grief she was before in, she almost smothered me in her embraces ; and told me, in a flood of tears, Papa could not hear me, and would play with me no more, for they were going to put him under ground, whence he would never come to us again."

And how it would have shocked Dr. Johnson !

For one who appreciates deeply such an essay as that and who is a worshipper at the shrine of Charles Lamb it is difficult to write of the eighteenth-century essayists, of the *Tatler*, *Spectator*, *Rambler*, and other periodicals, without a seeming harshness. They seem so wanting in vivid humanity, which was, indeed, the defect of the age that they endeavoured to please ; for the taint of journalism was already thrown upon the essay when the essayist was no longer a Montaigne or a Cowley writing for his own delight, but an Addison or a Dr. Johnson who were forced to consider the great question of circulation. I do not deny the great artistic merits of these writers. Not only was their style, at its best, a model of purity, but they brought humour and wit and satire into the essay. They did not gaze upon life from a cloister, but had a lively sense of being in the midst of the hurly-burly. They are lively and mobile ; they vary their attitude constantly, assuming now one character, now another. They

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sheared their form of bookish instances and selected their quotations judiciously, if narrowly. They excelled in the incisive sketch of character, not sparing the weaknesses of the public whose breakfast-table they served. They were guides and not flatterers, sticking resolutely to their own high standards, never descending to mere frivolity or vulgarity. Addison, after Steele, is the master of them all, and no praise could be too high for his essays which created the immortal character of Sir Roger de Coverley, though they can hardly be called essays in the sense of the word as used by Montaigne. These pictures of a squire and a gentleman are delicate studies of one side of English character given in the form of fiction, which is not strictly admissible to the essay-form. Yet deservedly famous as are these pieces of *genre*, fondly as we may love the good old knight and Will Wimble, they fill a very small space in the *Spectator*. One may sit a whole morning with Montaigne or Lamb, but I defy all but a few devotees of this period to take the *Spectator* as it comes for more than an hour. Before that time has elapsed a weariness of the constant moralizing, the everlasting letters from characters of the town, the monotony of the regular period and the close atmosphere of powder and patches creeps inevitably over the reader, and the sensation of being boxed up in a stuffy room with all the

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taste and fashion of eighteenth-century London becomes overpowering. One feels an intolerable longing to stretch one's legs, to mix with common humanity in the market-place and to breathe the winds of nature that blow over all men. Further, if this is the case with the *Spectator* of 1711, it is far worse with the *Rambler* of 1750. Addison is admirable in selections, but Dr. Johnson as an essayist is—I do not shrink from saying it—insufferably tedious. Look at his portentous solemnity on the theme, ideal for essayist, *dulce est desipere in loco*. Drone through such eloquence as this :

“After the exercises which the health of the body requires, and which have themselves a natural tendency to actuate and invigorate the mind, the most eligible amusement of a rational being seems to be that interchange of thoughts which is practised in free and easy conversation ; where suspicion is banished by experience, and emulation by benevolence ; where every man speaks with no other restraint than unwillingness to offend, and hears with no other disposition than desire to be pleased. There must be a time in which every man trifles ; and the only choice that nature offers us is, to trifle in company or alone. To join profit with pleasure, has been an old precept among men who have had very different conceptions of profit. All have agreed that our amusements should not terminate

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wholly in the present moment, but contribute more or less to future advantage. He that amuses himself among well-chosen companions, can scarcely fail to receive, from the most careless and obstreperous merriment which virtue can allow, some useful hints; nor can converse on the most familiar topics without some casual information. The loose sparkles of thoughtless wit may give new light to the mind, and the gay contention for paradoxical positions rectify the opinions."

"Eligible amusement," the "merriment which virtue can allow," indeed! Drone through this, I say, and then read Elia on "All Fools' Day." No, even the best of the eighteenth-century essayists can only be taken in small doses, and the worst, who decked out commonplace ideas in a dry rhetoric and proceeded through a shallow argument at the pace of pallbearers, cannot be taken at all. Their *corpus* is contained in fifty volumes: there let it lie comfortably buried. Their age could not foster the true essay, and it is no wonder that Sterne, warned by their example, chose to write his essays in the form of a novel. No essay of Fielding's touches "Tom Jones," and the graceful author of "The Vicar of Wakefield" would have been less gratefully remembered had his fame depended on the "Citizen of the World."

III

TOWARDS the end of the eighteenth century, by some miracle that has been variously explained, the civilized world, which had been modern before, suddenly became modern again after some eighty years of being old-fashioned. There is no need to recall the astounding wonders of that time—the French Revolution, the rise of Napoleon, the mortal convulsions of Europe, the Romantic movement, the new fountain of English poetry, the beginning of industrialism and so forth. It is enough for our purpose to notice that, among other marvels, the English essay reached a perfection to be found neither before nor afterwards. This is not to say that more people wrote good essays: it was rather the case that fewer people wrote better ones. The stream that had formed that rather stagnant pool of fifty volumes was now divided into several channels. Political pamphlets and squibs carried off some of the waters; others went, with ever-increasing flow, into the daily papers, which became more important, fuller and more literary, thus beginning the flood of occasional journalism which has swamped the essay in our

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own day. A third runnel was diverted into the critical reviews and magazines which were a new portent of the age. First arose the *Quarterly*, then the *Edinburgh*. Into these went the solid criticism of history, art and literature from the pen of a Southey, a Gifford, or a Croker whose articles were extended reviews of particular books or treatises on particular subjects. None of these streams produced the essay proper and they call for no further comment. The waters of the true essay, though they too were attracted by the magazines, ran from a few notable heads—Charles Lamb, William Hazlitt, Leigh Hunt and Thomas de Quincey—though there were doubtless other contributory trickles whose individuality is no longer remembered.

Of these four writers Leigh Hunt is by far the least important. He was a genial, facile writer, ever ready to turn out agreeable prose or verse, but there is nothing very remarkable about his essays, which could easily be equalled by the occasional articles on light subjects that appear daily or weekly in our periodicals. De Quincey, as I have said, was a true essayist who wrote but few true essays. Much of his prose work consists of serious criticism, and other parts of it are pure fantasy. One of his best, "The English Mail Coach," which has all its author's spirited *élan*, only leads up to a narration of his neurotic dreams, and even "Murder as a

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Fine Art," for all its boisterous fun, is a trifle too long and too insistent on details unpleasant in themselves to be a perfect essay. Undoubtedly De Quincey formally debars himself from fuller consideration here by having thrown so much of his finest essay-matter into "The Confessions of an Opium Eater," a work of consummate genius full of splendid passages that leave an ineffaceable impression. With regret I leave his incorrigibly discursive humour and his vividly coloured style, but there is no more warrant for lingering over the "Opium Eater" than over "Tristram Shandy." With regard to Hazlitt there are fewer limitations to be made. His essays are mostly true essays, and even where their subject is literary or æsthetic criticism he contrives to be neither heavy nor professorial, but, while fashioning the essay into the nicest engine for his critical purpose, to preserve its essential lightness and mobility. It has been said with truth that Hazlitt is a perfect model for all young writers. In him there is not a fault to be reprehended nor even a *culpable* deficiency. He is tolerant, broad-minded, highly cultivated, endowed with the most enlightened views on art, eloquent, humorous, and very human; his style is smooth and brilliant, yet he has the charm of seeming intimately conversational; he can soar on the wings of eloquence, yet his common sense is unimpeachable. Perhaps, if he had

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always reached the level of his essay "On Going a Journey," which all walkers should know by heart, no restraint could be put upon admiration. But his other moments have not quite this happiness. If one reads his essays on "The Past and the Future," "Genius and Common Sense," or "Living to Oneself," there is nothing to be said in criticism of them but this: "How much better Lamb would have handled these subjects!" There are solid reasons for holding Hazlitt the more perfect writer of the two, but there it is—the comment rises instinctively to one's lips. It comes, possibly, to this: that Hazlitt, as an essayist, was absolutely proficient, but Charles Lamb was a genius.

This shy, stuttering little clerk of the East India House, who looked like a Quaker in his dark coat, and in uncongenial company behaved as awkwardly as one of those poor relations whom he satirized, who often smoked too much and drank too much, who lived so bravely under the shadow of insanity and bore its reality (in the case of his unlucky sister) with such angelic devotion, who was—in the parlance of the world—an oddity, and whose friends—Coleridge, George Dyer, Burnett, Godwin, John Fenwick, Jem White—were oddities too, "in the world's eye a ragged regiment," who failed as a poet, a dramatist, and a journalist—this man, whom nature and circumstance had shabbily stunted

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and yet of whom his friend, Bryan Procter, wrote : " When he did speak his words had a flavour in them beyond any that I have heard elsewhere," brought to the essay a mind incomparably fitted for that form. It was a fertile mind, with a natural affinity to letters, that in the course of years had become richly planted and yielded richly ; it was a wonderfully assimilative mind, which made the matter devotedly acquired so inseparably its own, that its possessor had no need of a note-book, since reminiscences, cadences, instances, half-quotations poured themselves out from this store-house with perfect appositiveness ; it was a mind of unusual delicacy, capable of discerning the most elusive sentiments and of exquisitely appreciating character whether in life or in literary art ; it was a mind endowed with tolerance, with sympathy, with singularly pure taste and yet with a faculty of glowing enthusiasm for its individual preferences ; it was a mind by turns jovial, genial, witty, tender, wistful ; it was a companionable mind, a loving mind, for " he hated no one whom he had once met " ; it had been through the fire and yet preserved the original imp ; it was a rare mind, a precious mind, a mind of innumerable facets and infinite elasticity. Lamb himself describes, not its virtues, but its dynamic qualities in " Imperfect Sympathies " :

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“The owners of the sort of faculties I allude to have minds rather suggestive than comprehensive. They have no pretences to much clearness or precision in their ideas, or in their manner of expressing them. Their intellectual wardrobe (to confess fairly) has few whole pieces in it. They are content with fragments and scattered pieces of truth. She presents no full front to them—a feature or side-face at most. Hints and glimpses, germs and crude essays at a system, is the utmost they can pretend to. They beat up a little game peradventure—and leave it to knottier heads, more robust constitutions, to run it down. The light that lights them is not steady and polar, but mutable and shifting: waxing, and again waning. Their conversation is accordingly. They will throw out a random word in or out of season, and be content to let it pass for what it is worth. They cannot speak always as if they were on their oath—but must be understood, speaking or writing, with some abatement. They seldom wait to mature a proposition, but e’en bring it to market in the green ear. They delight to impart their defective discoveries as they arise, without waiting for their full development.”

Even this passage must be understood “with some abatement,” and those who are inclined to set Lamb down as an idle babbler, a mere agreeable rattle, may read “The Artificial

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Comedy of the Last Century ” or the analysis of character in “Twelfth Night ” in “Some of the Old Actors,” and make their recantation : but it expresses the electric mental activity, irreducible to the service of exactitude, which made him an unsatisfactory journalist and the king of essayists.

It is almost impossible to criticize Hazlitt's essays : this is also true of Elia's, with the added fact that, in every case, one is convinced of their being unsurpassable, so limpid and delicate is their style, their art so cunningly finished, so apparently careless. Lamb called them “a sort of unlicked, incondite things — villainously pranked out in an affected array of antique modes and phrases,” but he was laughing at the pedants. It is true that his mouth is ever full of snatches from Burton, Fuller and Sir Thomas Browne, that his sentences are punctuated with quaint interjections, and that his wit leaps hither and thither like “Ariel and all his quality.” His essays may be called unmethodical, their logical skeletons may not be obvious, passages may defy precise parsing, but it is the business of the essayist to flit and not to pad. He should be a man overcrowded with matter, who must cram a quantity into a small space ; he must force the pace and keep the reader a little breathless, only resting him now and then with a halt in the shade or a station before a fair prospect.

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Lamb performs this task of a pacemaker with consummate ingenuity, never flagging himself nor allowing the reader to flag, but ever tempting him on with new delights.

To begin giving instances of Lamb's perfection is a dangerous step, for one would lief quote every essay entire, and to make a choice is bewildering. In his work, as in that of a great painter, there are infinite gradations of light and shade. From the whimsical brightness of "All Fools' Day" or "A Dissertation on Roast Pig," to the melancholy of "Blakesmoor in Hertfordshire" or "Confessions of a Drunkard," there stretches the whole spectrum of sentiment. It is impossible to decide in what mood Elia is most enchanting. When one reads Bridget Elia's speech in "Old China":

"Do you remember the brown suit, which you made to hang upon you, till all your friends cried shame upon you, it grew so threadbare—and all because of that folio Beaumont and Fletcher, which you dragged home late at night from Barker's in Covent Garden? Do you remember how we eyed it for weeks before we could make up our minds to the purchase, and had not come to a determination till it was near ten o'clock of the Saturday night, when you set off from Islington, fearing you would be too late—and when the old bookseller with some grumbling opened his shop, and by the twinkling

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taper (for he was setting bedwards) lighted out the relic from his dusty treasures—and when you lugged it home, wishing it were twice as cumbersome—and when you presented it to me—and when we were exploring the perfectness of it (*collating* you called it)—and while I was repairing some of the loose leaves with paste, which your impatience would not suffer to be left till daybreak—was there no pleasure in being a poor man? Or can those neat black clothes which you wear now, and are so careful to keep brushed, since we have become rich and finical, give you half the honest vanity, with which you flaunted it about in that overworn suit—your old corbeau—for four or five weeks longer than you should have done, to pacify your conscience for the mighty sum of fifteen—or sixteen shillings was it?—a great affair we thought it then—which you had lavished on the old folio?”

When one reads this speech or Elia's answer to it in the same essay, or the pathetic vision, inspired by Lamb's first love, in “Dream Children,” or “Mackery End,” or “A Superannuated Man,” or “Christ's Hospital Thirty-five Years Ago,” one would swear that Lamb excelled most in the mood of wistful reminiscence. But the oath would not be binding. At another time one's love goes out to his marvellous portraits, those of Samuel Salt and

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Lovell in "The Old Benchers of the Inner Temple," of George Dyer in "Oxford in the Vacation," of his brother in "My Relations," of Ralph Bigod in "Two Races of Men," of Sarah Battle and of the ghostly South-Sea House with its phantom clerks, Evans, John Tipp, the polished Man and rattling Walter Plumer: at another one will extol his graceful satires such as "The Old and New Schoolmaster," "Modern Gallantry" or "A Bachelor's Complaint of the Behaviour of Married People." Then, again, one cherishes his moments of dashing absurdity as in "All Fools' Day," "Newspapers Thirty-Five Years Ago," or "Popular Fallacies," those inimitable examples of comic brevity, and one comes to the conclusion that Lamb is most himself in such passages as this from "Grace Before Meat":

"I am no Quaker at my food. I confess I am not indifferent to the kinds of it. Those unctuous morsels of deer's flesh were not made to be received with dispassionate services. I hate a man who swallows it, affecting not to know what he is eating. I suspect his taste in higher matters. I shrink instinctively from one who professes to like minced veal. There is a physiognomical character in the tastes for food. C—— holds that a man cannot have a pure mind who refuses apple-dumplings. I am not certain

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but he is right. With the decay of my first innocence, I confess a less and less relish daily for those innocuous cates. The whole vegetable tribe have lost their gust for me. Only I stick to asparagus, which still seems to inspire gentle thoughts,”

or in such a characteristic uplifting as the *finale* of “A Chapter on Ears,” where Elia recounts his sensations at the organ-playing of Novello :

“I stagger under the weight of harmony, reeling to and fro at my wits’ end ;—clouds, as of frankincense, oppress me—priests, altars, censers, dazzle before me—the genius of *his* religion hath me in her toils—a shadowy triple tiara invests the brow of my friend, late so naked, so ingenuous—he is Pope—and by him sits, like as in the anomaly of dreams, a she-Pope too,—tricorneted like himself !—I am converted, and yet a Protestant ;—at once *malleus hereticorum*, and myself grand heresiarch : or three heresies centre in my person :—I am Marcion, Ebion, and Cerinthus—Gog and Magog—what not ?—till the coming in of the friendly supper-tray dissipates the figment, and a draught of true Lutheran beer (in which my friend shows himself no bigot) at once reconciles me to the rationalities of a purer faith ; and restores me to the genuine unterrifying aspects of my pleasant-countenanced host and hostess.”

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But it is no use : one might read through the “*Essays of Elia*” every month of a year, and then be unable to pick one’s favourite. Elia responds to almost any mood. Nobody, as he says, would take up the “*Faerie Queen*” as a stopgap nor deny that “*Milton almost requires a solemn service of music before you take him up*” ; but Elia himself, whether read at leisure or in hasty snatches, is fascinating at all times. Other essayists, before or since Charles Lamb, have equalled him in some of his excellences, but taken all in all he stands without a rival. To imitate him is as impossible as wholly to explain him, for he followed no school and founded none : yet if I were asked for a subtle test of profound acquaintance with the essential qualities of English prose literature, I should find it difficult to devise any more searching than the task of giving lucidly a judicious appreciation of the “*Essays of Elia*.”

IV

SINCE Lamb there has been no essayist entirely worthy to place by his side, though Robert Louis Stevenson may, perhaps, be classed with Hazlitt. To guard once more against misconception, let me not be supposed to deny that the nineteenth century has had its great masters of English prose. One may enjoy and admire Macaulay, Matthew Arnold, Carlyle, Ruskin, Walter Pater and John Addington Symonds, while refusing them a place among the English essayists. Macaulay called his critical writings essays, but the reason for his exclusion and that of other critical writers has already been given. Macaulay's vivid discussions of history and letters, with their glittering antitheses and the stately glamour of their evocations, were contributions to knowledge, not *divertissements*. He is always the historian or the critic lecturing to a fascinated audience ; his eye is always on the main purpose, that of settling somebody's case ; his business was not to be leisurely and discursive, but to lead his theme up to an effective climax. One may read Macaulay's essays, I grant, purely for the sake of æsthetic delectation, but it is a delectation

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entirely different from that induced by reading Lamb, with whom Macaulay, except for using a common language, had no point of contact. The same kind of consideration applies to Carlyle and Ruskin. Their eloquent discourses—the rough force of the one and the magnificent declamation of the other—must be called rhapsodies rather than essays. As for Walter Pater, he was an admirable craftsman in constructing mosaics of musical speech, a subtle appreciator of beauty, a great stylist, if you will, but a fine style and an exquisite taste do not make an essayist if a certain magic sympathy with common humanity be wanting. On account of his popularity in England it would not be fitting to omit the name of Emerson, who was a lofty thinker with a finished style: but his essays are too consistently lectures to the aspiring. Really to enjoy Emerson implies a considerable moral and intellectual thirstiness: those who do not pant for these uplifting water-brooks, preferring a potion with more body and flavour, find in them an alkaline flatness which, like the springs of Contrexéville, is excellent as a corrective, insipid as a beverage.

Robert Louis Stevenson certainly had in him the stuff of an essayist. He knew the meaning of zest. He was a man of wide human sympathies and a capacious, intellectual appetite. "Times change," he wrote to W. E. Henley in the

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preface to "*Virginibus Puerisque*," "opinions vary to their opposite, and still this world appears a brave gymnasium, full of sea-bathing, and horse exercise and bracing, manly virtues"—a promising outlook for an essayist. In spite of his carefully polished style; there is nothing cold or hard in Stevenson's essays: he lavishes on them his own bright, lovable, mercurial personality. The best of them are a pleasure to read and a pleasure to remember. The one on "*Walking Tours*," for instance, is as perfect as Hazlitt's "*On Going a Journey*," full of the joy of limbs healthily wearied, ecstatically reposed.

"You lean from the window, your last pipe reeking whitely in the darkness, your body full of delicious pains, your mind enthroned in the seventh circle of content; when suddenly the mood changes, the weathercock goes about, and you ask yourself one question more: whether, for the interval, you have been the wisest philosopher or the most egregious of donkeys? Human experience is not yet able to reply; but at least you have had a fine moment, and looked down upon all the kingdoms of the earth. And whether it was wise or foolish, to-morrow's travel will carry you, body and mind, into some different parish of the infinite."

Such a passage as that, or the brilliant sketches of physiognomy in the first essay on "*Talk and*

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Talkers," or parts of "Travels with a Donkey," place Stevenson in the first rank of English essayists. Yet it cannot be said that he always attains so high a level. There are many essays of his that tickle the ear but do not arrest the memory. His gentle moralizings on love and life and death that fill so much of "*Virginibus Puerisque*," gay upon the surface, inwardly melancholy, pass out of the mind like a tuneful song heard faintly upon the water. For all their attractiveness of form they are a trifle sentimental, a trifle commonplace, a trifle wanting in a firm grasp of reality; they are the headwaters feeding that shallow pool wherein the Narcissus of to-day, Mr. A. C. Benson, yearns with half-ashamed admiration over his own image. Stevenson's great defect as an essayist is his constancy of feature. The reader's mental picture of him seldom varies: those expressive lips have always a wistful smile, those large eyes are ever so lightly filmed with mist. He read his own heart and the hearts of others with understanding, but he shrank from really groping in either. In writing about life he gives the impression of sparing the boys and girls of his title the knowledge that devastating passion, blighting foolishness and hideous hypocrisy are among its ingredients. Charles Lamb did not often seriously moralize, but the gentle Elia could be tragically poignant, whereas in Steven-

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son's philosophic view there is something of the hopeless prettiness to be found in Leader's landscapes. If an essayist is going on the moral tack, he must do so ruthlessly, giving himself away and showing up everybody else. This was the great virtue of Samuel Butler, and is to-day the virtue of Mr. Bernard Shaw, whom I claim as an essayist, though he may never be remembered as such, on the score of the introductions to his plays. The essay, it was said earlier in this little book, should prove nothing : Mr. Shaw certainly tries to prove something, but then he frequently fails so very engagingly. He has an exhilarating force, a trenchant wit, an unfailing eye for apt instances, a contempt for every fool and a respect for no authority. Besides this, having chosen a path in which delicacy is out of place, he has neither delicacy nor fear. One suspects that he is not so ravening a lion as his roar would seem to portend, but one knows him to be alert, never to be taken un-awares, ready to pounce with avidity upon the delusions of his fellow-men and to rend them with an animal gusto. To change the simile, the charm of Mr. Shaw as an essayist is the gallant clangour of his sally forth to battle, like some paladin of Charlemagne's, with trumpets blowing, armour clattering, and weapons glittering, deftly flourishing the sword of his wit and intimidating the enemy before coming to grips

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with him. There was blatancy and vulgarity in the paladins, and so there is in Mr. Shaw, but one can no more help admiring him than the humble hosts who suffered his onslaughts could help admiring Orlando.

But Mr. Bernard Shaw is by no means the only essayist of our day : there are Mr. Max Beer-bohm, Mr. George Street, Mr. G. K. Chesterton, Mr. Belloc, Mr. E. V. Lucas, Mr. Charles Whibley and Vernon Lee, among others who could lay a claim to this title. Nobody would deny that Max is supremely worthy of it. In addition to the charming flavour of their wit and all the happy whimsicality which is their special quality, his essays are all carefully finished works of art by a master in fastidiousness. Not only have they, in common with the essays of Mr. Street, the stamp of literary distinction, but a something else which is only to be expressed by the rather old-fashioned word "elegance." For all his cunning air of lightness and carelessness, Max is as nice in his phraseology as D'Annunzio or Mr. Henry James ; his rhythms are subtle, his periods as carefully carved as a Japanese sword-guard. He has been welcomed more than once by enthusiastic critics as one of England's great essayists for all time. To forecast the verdict of posterity is a foolish proceeding, but the question suggests itself whether Max's ethereal manner is stout enough

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to stand the wear and tear of ages. He amuses us and charms us, but he never moves us and seldom makes us think. Nobody can ever take Max quite seriously, for he has never allowed us to see more than the exquisite, the brilliant caricaturist, the witty *raisonneur* in his literary character. The great essayist must be something of a sage, though his humour have all the agility of Puck and Ariel. Max has preferred to keep his serious side for himself and his friends, and his essays, being the *soufflés* that he intended them to be, must take the fortune of their light structure. Mr. Street is another who has made an artistic instrument of his prose upon which he produces the most delightful modulations. Yet here again—it is a bare statement, since regrets would be impertinent—the artist contents himself with variations upon the less fundamental themes of life in moods that are at their gayest genially humorous, at their darkest but gently querulous. There is no Gallic vivacity in Mr. Street, who is a thorough Briton with the stuff of Addison in his essays. He is a sage, rather than a wit, but the kind of sage who agreeably occupies a club arm-chair through a Saturday afternoon, making the minutes fly so pleasantly that married men in his company forget the wifely tea-table that awaits them. He writes less to satisfy a craving for self-expression than to entertain others, an end achieved, with

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rare exceptions, only at the expense of immortality. Yet Max Beerbohm and Mr. Street, whether they be or be not included in the English classics at a later age, are certainly worthy of the highest admiration in their own. I read Mr. Street's portrait of Mr. Alfred Chudder with as much pleasure as any pages on which Sir Roger de Coverley appears, and the charm of Max Beerbohm's "Yet Again" is only surpassed for me by the "Essays of Elia." There are none among their contemporaries whose essays have such high qualities or whose work is so invariably finished. Mr. Chesterton and Mr. Belloc are, of course, deeper thinkers; the special gift of the one is that of paradox, while the other excels in the description of things seen in vagabondage; both have rollicking humour that is infectious and an appetite for British beef and beer. Mr. E. V. Lucas, at his best, has the flavour of certain moods of Lamb; Mr. Whibley is masterly when the articulation of his thought is as careful as the rounding of his sentences, and Vernon Lee, when she is not too pantingly appreciative, comes in her particular manner not far off perfection. The unfortunate thing that Mr. Chesterton and the others so seldom are at their best in their short, random writings. So often with them a good idea is spoiled by hasty thought and hasty composition, or they are obviously striving to raise fruit from a barren

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inspiration. They are compelled—and we are all to blame for it—to write a specified number of words at specified intervals, and, seeing that the greedy public makes no distinction between their best and their worst, act humanly upon this painful fact, and gaily collect this taskwork of theirs at the end of the year into pretty little books that save us the trouble of looking for Christmas presents.

In fact, the enormous demand for what is called occasional journalism has destroyed the essay as a work of art. Writers must live, and since “articles” that attract jaded readers for five minutes are well paid for, it is natural that few should spend hours polishing an essay that needs leisure and a cultivated mind for its enjoyment, when the result of their labour is certain to be rejected by any editor as not being topical or as wanting human interest. The huge development of journalistic enterprise to-day has its advantages, nor is it to be deplored that the best equipped writers of an age should contribute to the newspapers, but, the paramount influences in editorial offices being what they are, it is hopeless to look to journalism for permanent works of art. The editor’s sole concern is with what his readers are thinking of now : the past is nothing to him, the extreme limit of his future is next week. His success lies in catching the particular ; the universal spells

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ruin. If a man has in him an idea that hits the moment he must drag it out and fling it down in an hour or so, crude and ragged, or its season has passed for ever. The late Richard Middleton put the case well at the beginning of his little book "Monologues," when he wrote, deploring the decay of the essay :

"The fact is, that essays are bad journalism in the literal sense of that elastic word, because they take no count of time, while it is the function of journalism to tear the heart out of to-day. A good essay should start and end in a moment as long as eternity ; it should have the apparent aimlessness of life, and, like life, it should have its secret purpose. Perhaps the perfect essay would take a lifetime to write and a lifetime to comprehend ; but, in their essence, essays . . . ignore time and negate it. They cannot be read in railway trains by travellers who intend to get out at a certain station, for the mere thought of a settled destination will prevent the reader from achieving the proper leisurely frame of mind. Nor can they be written for a livelihood, for a man who sits down to write an essay should be careless as to whether his task shall ever be finished or not."

These words were written by a man who had in him both an essayist and a poet, yet failed to make a livelihood : and they are true. Writing is now too highly organized a trade for occasional

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incursions to be encouraged, and now that reading is regarded far more as a narcotic than a stimulus, readers have no discrimination. If an elderly administrator sat down to imitate Montaigne to-day he would have to publish at his own risk and to his certain loss, no matter how great his art, while any ancient numbskull who can string together tedious "Memoirs of a Busy Life," with anecdotes of a few prominent persons, is sure of a large library circulation. And what magazine would accept the "Essays of Elia" to-day? Lamb would be told that he was far too obscure and elusive, and that if he had anything of interest to say about the old South-Sea House, it must be written in a "chatty" manner without exclamation marks. As for "Mackery End" or "Old China" or "Thoughts on Books and Reading," nobody would look at them. Newspapers and periodicals do not want discursiveness, whence it follows that the essay is not to be sought in them, and since it is difficult to get essays published the impulses of the potential essayist are inevitably checked.

Yet, since the stuff of essays and essayists is in every age, and since nature tends to find a use for everything, it is interesting to inquire what use is being made of this material in modern letters. The inquiry is not arduous, for it is easy to see this essay-stuff peeping out at us from various directions. The publicity in which we

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all move to-day and the insatiable curiosity about others that is its corollary has made autobiography an increasingly popular form of literature. If an autobiography ostensibly deals with facts, it permits a great measure of self-analysis and reflection by the way. Montaigne would be now advised to write the story of his life in two large volumes which would enchant the reviewers. Sterne would be commended for his "Sentimental Journey," provided that he gave the lady her real name and put off the absurd travesty of Yorick. Mr. George Moore has brilliantly exploited modern curiosity in "Ave," "Salve" and "Vale," inimitable books, ostensibly biographical, which appear in their true light if regarded simply as extended essays. There has never been an essayist quite like Mr. George Moore, at least in England. He is the completely ruthless artist, to whom ethical propriety and intellectual truth are trifles compared with artistic truth, which is the consistency of all parts of a picture with one another and the presentation of a view—*his* view—as one convincing and arresting whole. If one cannot come to him as one would come to a room full of Goya's portraits, it is a waste of time and indignation to read him: if one can, neither time nor indignation is wasted, for the admiration of an extraordinary work of art will temper all other considerations.

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Again, much essay-stuff is taken into the drama, as it was by Euripides and Shakespeare, only to-day dramatists may be more obviously discursive. Oscar Wilde was one of the first to see how the essay might be presented as a play. Not only did he write "The Importance of Being Earnest," but in that sparkling little book "Intentions" he adapted the most delightfully witty essays in criticism to the dramatic form of conversation between characters. The imaginary dialogue was, of course, not new. Berkeley and Landor, among others, had employed it. But they made no pretence at being dramatic, whereas Oscar Wilde's dialogue in "Intentions" has true dramatic quality. In a smaller degree Mr. Anthony Hope's "Dolly Dialogues" are essays set in dramatic form. Above all, Mr. Bernard Shaw, who could have said all that he had to say in the essay-form of which he is a master, has chosen to show that an essay can be dramatic and drama be an essay. There is no need to labour the point, for by this time it is a commonplace: only those who prefer the essay to the drama as the ideal form for discursive and original thinking must regret the spending of so much good material on "Man and Superman," "You Never Can Tell," or "Fanny's First Play." What distinguishes the work of Mr. Shaw and his followers from that of, let us say, Sir Arthur Pinero and Sir James

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Barrie is not that the dialogue contains general reflections on life and manners, but that it is so often purely discursive for the sake of being discursive, hanging up the passage of dramatic events till the particular digression is over. Whether this is a good thing for the drama or not must be left to others to decide. At all events, it seems probable that this dramatic use of essay-material will be extended rather than restricted in the future.

Lastly, there is fiction, which in its overwhelming quantity and variety assimilates every possible kind of literary matter, from metaphysics to art criticism, from the most rarefied mysticism to the most sordid realism. To-day everybody—the cynic, the sentimentalist, the devout, the profane, the Puritan, the profligate, the politician and the builder's labourer—writes a novel, and it is only to be expected that the essayist should have been constrained to follow the majority. It would be difficult to point to so complete an essayist among the writers of English novels as Mr. Shaw is among the writers of plays. Perhaps Samuel Butler comes nearest, on the score of "The Way of All Flesh," if we omit the authors of "Tristram Shandy" and "Humphry Clinker." Yet the discursive genius, worked into the novel, is to be seen on all sides. Mr. Wells has written far better essays in "Ann Veronica" and "The New Machia-

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velli " than in "An Englishman looks at the World," and the discursiveness of Mr. Arnold Bennett's "Clayhanger" is of a far higher quality than his cheap lectures on how to meet life with a broad smile and avoid domestic controversies. Mr. Wells and Mr. Bennett, whose clarity of vision is more remarkable than the perfection of their art, lose little by their proclivity for rambling on their way. Yet their example, like Mr. Shaw's, is of questionable value. It is one thing to write fiction like Rabelais or Sterne or Anatole France, in which digressions adorn a bare plot as the blossoms of the Japanese plum its naked branch ; it is another to compose a story and fling a few discursive boulders in the way of its development. Mr. George Moore, whose artistic eye has a rare singleness, kept his two kinds of matters distinct, to the great advantage of "Evelyn Innes" and "Esther Waters." But many of our younger writers of fiction are tending to weaken their effect by not observing this necessary distinction. Instead of practising artistic economy and unswerving directness which, in spite of their disregard by some great novelists, are peculiarly necessary to high achievement in imaginative art, their neglect being only compensated for by the display of exceptional genius in other directions, they are content to be prolix, aimless and formless. The result would be very much

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worse than it is, were it not for the influence of Mr. Thomas Hardy and Mr. Henry James, in whose masterpieces the drama moves beautifully to its climax without hindrance from loose, extraneous material.

A revival of the true essay would have many advantages. It would purge other forms of literature of their humours, it would maintain the fine standard of English prose style which is in sad danger of declining, and it would perpetuate a particularly English form of literary art which is of the highest intrinsic value. But it is to be feared that in this case hope can derive small encouragement from present circumstance. Readers are too restless, writers have become too agile. Life, which was once reckoned by days, is now reckoned by moments which the future threatens with still further subdivision. As the image of a continuous flow of water, when projected through a shutter revolving with intense rapidity, appears on the screen to fall in single drops, so the continuous stream of time in our day appears a jerky procession of unconnected particles. Under such conditions the essay cannot come to being. In Mr. Wells' latest Utopia men, being absolutely free from material struggle, again find leisure to fight duels for a woman's beauty. In that day, perhaps, the essay may be born again.

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